CRAFTS

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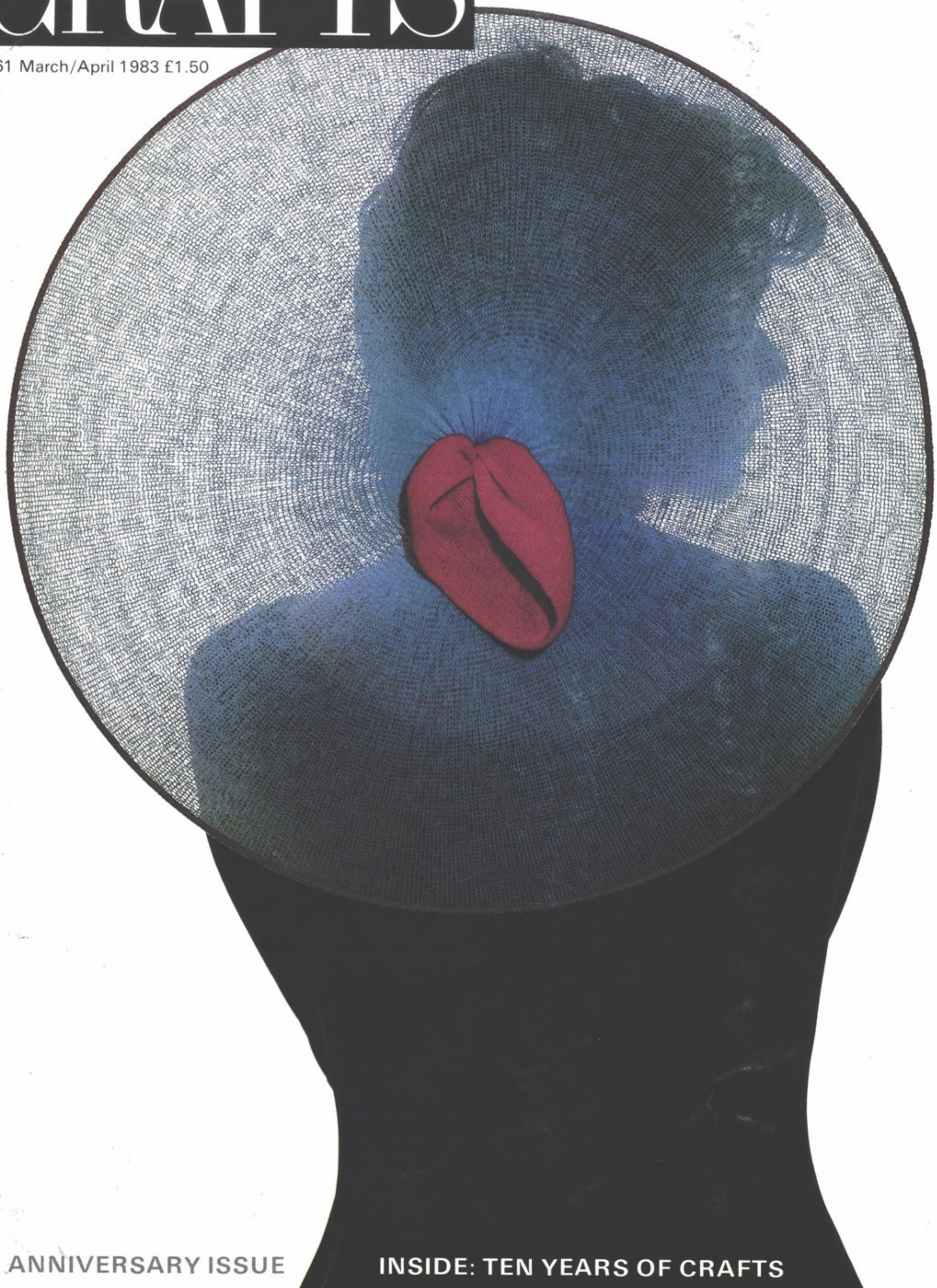


ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

INSIDE: TEN YEARS OF CRAFTS

THROUGH THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE

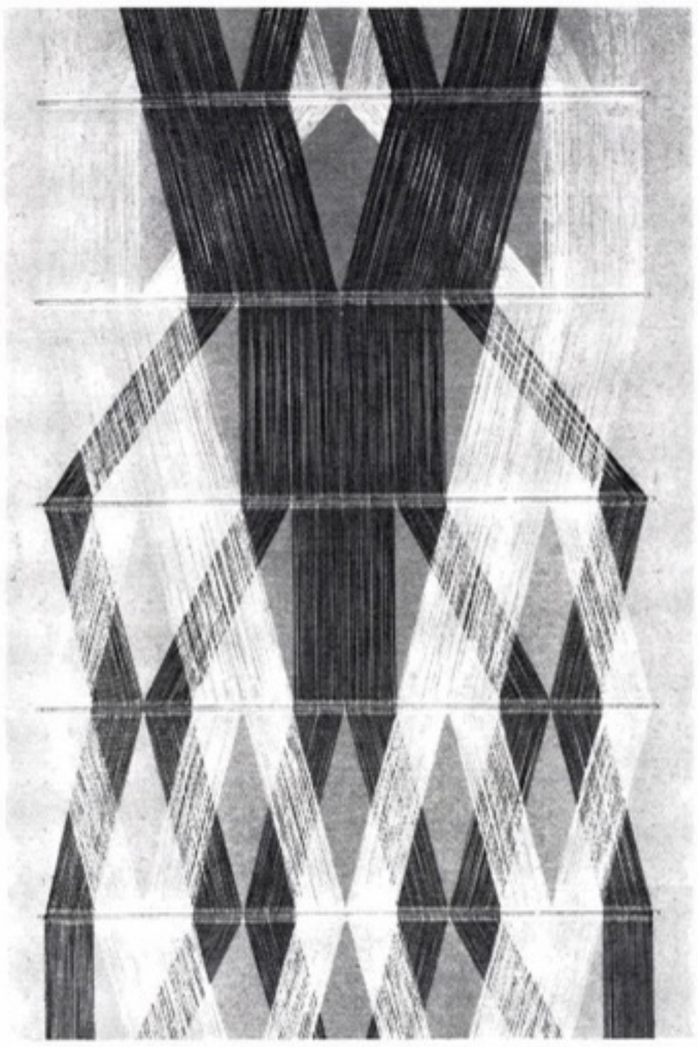
Ann Sutton undertakes the task of assessing developments in textiles since the year when "The Craftsman's Art" and Abakanowicz at the Arnolfini indicated what was possible

I believe that looking backwards Can Seriously Damage Your (creative) Health – as Barnett Newman pointed out, "Artists need aesthetics like birds need ornithology." But having been asked to, I found I had a lovely time doing it and learnt a lot in the process.

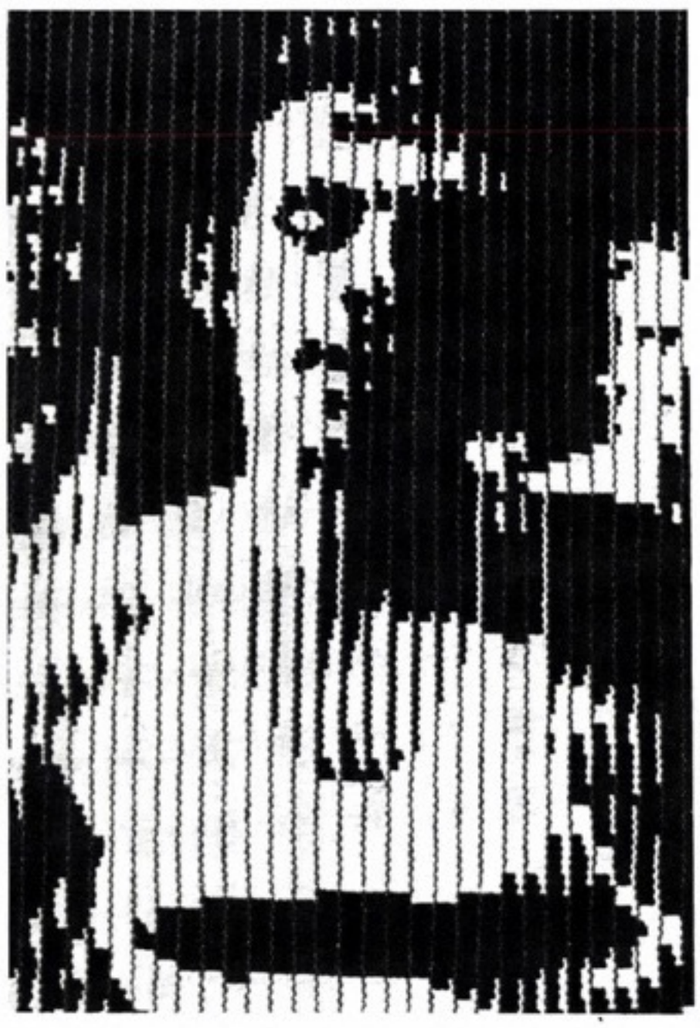
Ten years is not long – about a fifth of a working life? What amazed me generally, right across the craft field, was that the "big names" were still the same big names (give or take a few) and that on the whole they were doing the *same work* today that they were doing for *The Craftsman's Art* at the V & A in 1973, the exhibition which launched into the public consciousness the then Crafts Advisory Committee. Nearly seventy examples of current textile work were included, with a strength, which still prevails, in woven tapestry and the more naive embroidery panels. I remember Roger Oates's *Sack* and Helena Hernmarck's photographic imagery in her large and professionally-executed pieces. My own work was large, exuberant and flashy, due to the fact that the Crafts Advisory Committee had commissioned it (it is difficult to go "over the top" unless one is financially secure; this applied then as now). That year had also brought us the serious, sombre woven messages of the great Magdalena Abakanowicz at the Arnolfini and the Whitechapel, and the memorable exhibition of Navajo rugs/blankets at the Institute of Contemporary Arts. Here, weavers stood quietly in awe. Painters, seeing the works for the first time, were vociferous: "Look at the forms, the use of colour – magic!" they crowed. To which weavers said simply, "why do they think we went into weaving in the first place?"

With such exhibitions, everyone should have been off to a flying start, and it would be good to be able to record an upward trend in standards from that time. But, to me, it's been more like up*hill*. Perhaps it is due to the British suspicion of foreign influences, but certainly in the field of fine-art textiles (for want of a better phrase), we have been submerged by our insularity and beaten by the rest of the world. (Only *very* recently has there been any improvement.) The splendid Dovecote studios, quietly weaving away at their *haute-lisses* in Edinburgh, kept the British flag flying in the Lausanne Tapestry Biennales for us, but often as the executors of work conceived by a painter. Archie Brennan, who directed the studios during some of their finest hours, was a great figure in textiles at the beginning of the ten-year period and thankfully *he* was never afraid of a mad joke, even in that most laborious of techniques. (Now that we've all survived ten years, and not the easiest in economic history, we may have the confidence to relax a bit, and even accept some bursts of eccentricity. Things are improving in the other crafts: jewellery, for example, gets wonderfully silly at times.)

The Lausanne Biennale was such a worry; everyone worldwide was working towards it, and making larger and larger pieces in the vain hope of being included. There was no other show to aim for. Britain, so bad at the Biennale anyway, had nothing to lose by initiating a snook-cocking rival show. I must confess that this was my idea. I called it, pretentiously and with tongue-in-cheek, *The First International Exhibition of Miniature Textiles* – and discovered that it wasn't too difficult to

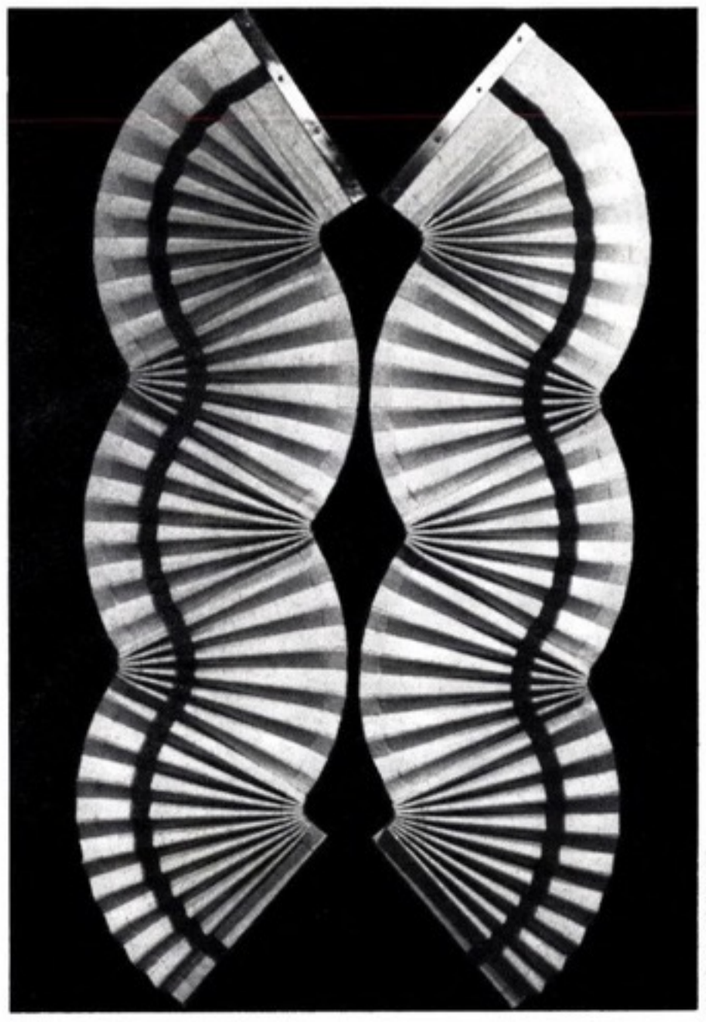


Linen macrogauze by Peter Collingwood, 1976



SHIPLEY ART GALLERY COLLECTION

The Runner, *tapestry by Archie Brennan, 1976*



HADLER GALLERIES

Woven hanging by Warren Seelig, USA, 1978

DAVID CRIPPS

Detail of giant rope sculpture by Magdalena Abakanowicz, as exhibited at Arnolfini, Bristol, 1973

Clockwise from top left: details of quilts by Pauline Burbidge, 1979, and Diana Harrison, 1981; ikat woven hanging by Mary Restieaux, 1978; knitted garment by Puri Sharifi, 1976; detail mesh wallpiece by Michael Brennand-Wood, 1979. Opposite: detail of hand-painted blouse by Sue Rangeley, 1978

start an International Movement. The exhibition released a torrent of amazing tiny work from all over the world. It was almost frightening: people started working specifically for it (no major finance or large premises/equipment required), with some zealous folk producing near-copies of work photographed in previous catalogues, so eager were they for acceptance. After the fourth show, it had to be stopped for its own good. The third one was, I think, the best. It certainly proved one thing – that regular predictable exhibitions can channel work into false patterns, worldwide. This is not to be encouraged. Now, the small size of the V & A Craft Shop is unwittingly having the same effect in Britain, on all the crafts.

During the last ten years, the various arms of the octopus called Textiles have developed at different rates. *Printed textiles* are still in embryo but now fewer people are deterred by the cost of equipment – or are there bigger grants from the Crafts Council? My money is on Helen Cowie. *Block printing* has been rediscovered, thanks largely to exhibitions of work from the twenties and thirties by Barron and Larcher and by Enid Marx, and partly to the current wish for less complicated equipment. *Batik* seems to have been practised by only one person in the past decade. *Dyers* are getting more timid – vegetable dyers are feeling ecologically guilty, and any tut-tutting about the ethics of dip-dyeing quietens when the seductive results are seen, such as the hangings by Mary Resticaux. Indigo dyeing has seen a great revival, with its mystique and qualities of low penetration so essential for ikat. West Surrey College of Art and Design at Farnham, continuing its sound and unswerving course of fine craftsmanship (with ethnic overtones), showed the way, and Jun Tomita, a Japanese expert who taught there, spread the word. The great Japanese exhibitions, at the V & A and the Royal Academy, plus some smaller specialist shows and a recent short-lived fashion for indigo-ikat Japanese work clothes, all added up to paradise for dyers. For sheer use of colour (and I couldn't care less whether she dyes it herself), my prize goes to Mary Farmer.

In the seventies *spinning* took off. Sheep, particularly the jolly Jacobs, fitted in well with the *Guardian*/scrubbed-pine way of life, and now spinners outnumber weavers. But they will not, alas, be aspiring towards any Crafts Council Index. To make the yarn is sufficient for them, and to knit it into a lumpy something for the family is the ultimate achievement. Even the once-mighty weavers' guilds (still great in numbers) cannot seem to divert these happy spinners into worthier ambitions. They double in number, daily. The few serious and classical spinners must have enjoyed the Rita Beales exhibition at the Crafts Study Centre in Bath, where many gentle retrospective shows are quickly putting straight the past and, I hope, inspiring present craftspeople.

The interest in *felting* can be traced back directly to the *Art of the Feltmaker* in 1980, an inspired touring exhibition originated by Mary Burkett, Director of the Abbot Hall Art Gallery in Kendal. Jenny Cowern started her "Skyfelts" then. Concurrently, *papermaking* came over from America and spread about the land like a disease, caught, it seems, by almost everyone with an electric blender. It appeased the ecologically guilty, but, so far, Hockney has won.

With *Knitting*, the interest increases both in hand and machine work. Kaffe Fassett has inspired most of it: his work, with that of Puri Sharifi and Susie Freeman, stands out as original and soul-stirring. (There are still some knitters proudly producing woolly sheep on woolly hill-sides). What knitters now need is a great inspirational exhibition.

Early copies of *Crafts* gave us a lot of information about ethnic weaving, printing, embroidery, sprang. The blame can't be put onto the magazine, but many textile craftsmen and women took it all in and couldn't get rid of it. (So useful, especially if you make garments. All you need is a copy of Tilke, and you're set up for life. It saves all the bother of keeping in touch with anything to do with fashion, and if everything is made out of squares and rectangles there's no waste. "Timeless, that's what we'll call it.") Fortunately, fashion has been going along that path for a while, but what happens now that the change is coming?

"Soft Art" was a bit of a danger at one time – everything, hard or soft, was reproduced life-size and three-dimensional, for a while. Content became heavy. The Women's Movement had a field-day. The over-graphic "panel," on the other hand, was equally embarrassing once. Over-contrived (and unfashionable) dress decoration ran riot. The embroiderers pulled out the stops, too far (to state their case?), before settling down to something quite healthy. So, *embroidery* stopped being a dirty word – the embroidery departments in the colleges saw to that. And, significantly, the best fine-art textile department, at Goldsmith's, managed to achieve this status while still under the name of "Embroidery."

Lace-making, will it ever take off? Perhaps because it is slow to produce, no one has yet been confident enough in the technique to innovate. And where are the *baskets*? Apart from excellent makers of traditional baskets, such as Alastair Heseltine and David Drew, and the odd arty container, there is no sign of the American surge of interest. I find this surprising, since the necessary equipment is minimal, materials are usually inexpensive or free and the possibilities are endless. There is no John McQueen (USA) here yet. The *quilters*, though, have come steadily onward, both amateurs and professionals. The shows of *Irish Quilts* at Somerset House in 1981, *Nineteenth-century quilts* at Gimpel Fils in 1981, of contemporary quilts by Eng Tow and Pauline Burbidge, and currently the touring show of *Quilting, Patchwork and Appliqué*, have all helped. The future's good.

The most popular textile craft continues to be *weaving* – rugs, cloth, tapestry etc. But again, it will never show on the Crafts Council's Index because these eager weavers are busy scurrying around from course to course, collecting techniques like Girl Guide badges. When the *Craft of the Weaver* television series started in 1980 (programmes on the crafts – a new phenomenon in the last ten years), the BBC were bewildered by the thousands of requests for a free leaflet, five times their estimation.

In 1978 Breon O'Casey tried to make us believe that "Weaving is Easy" (*Crafts* No. 30), a plea for wobbly rugs made on simple looms. While we waited to see the decent rugs which he swore were possible with unskilled hands, a rash of skilled precision broke out in all textile directions: works included Warren Seelig's immaculate accordioned woven double-cloths (the Crafts Council were quite right; we had to see them to believe them), Eng Tow's controlled stitching and tucking and Diana Harrison's precise spraying onto cloth. All these looked as though no human hand had touched them, and were admired greatly. (But Breon O'Casey-type weaving was, indeed, easier and most fell back, cosily, into it.)

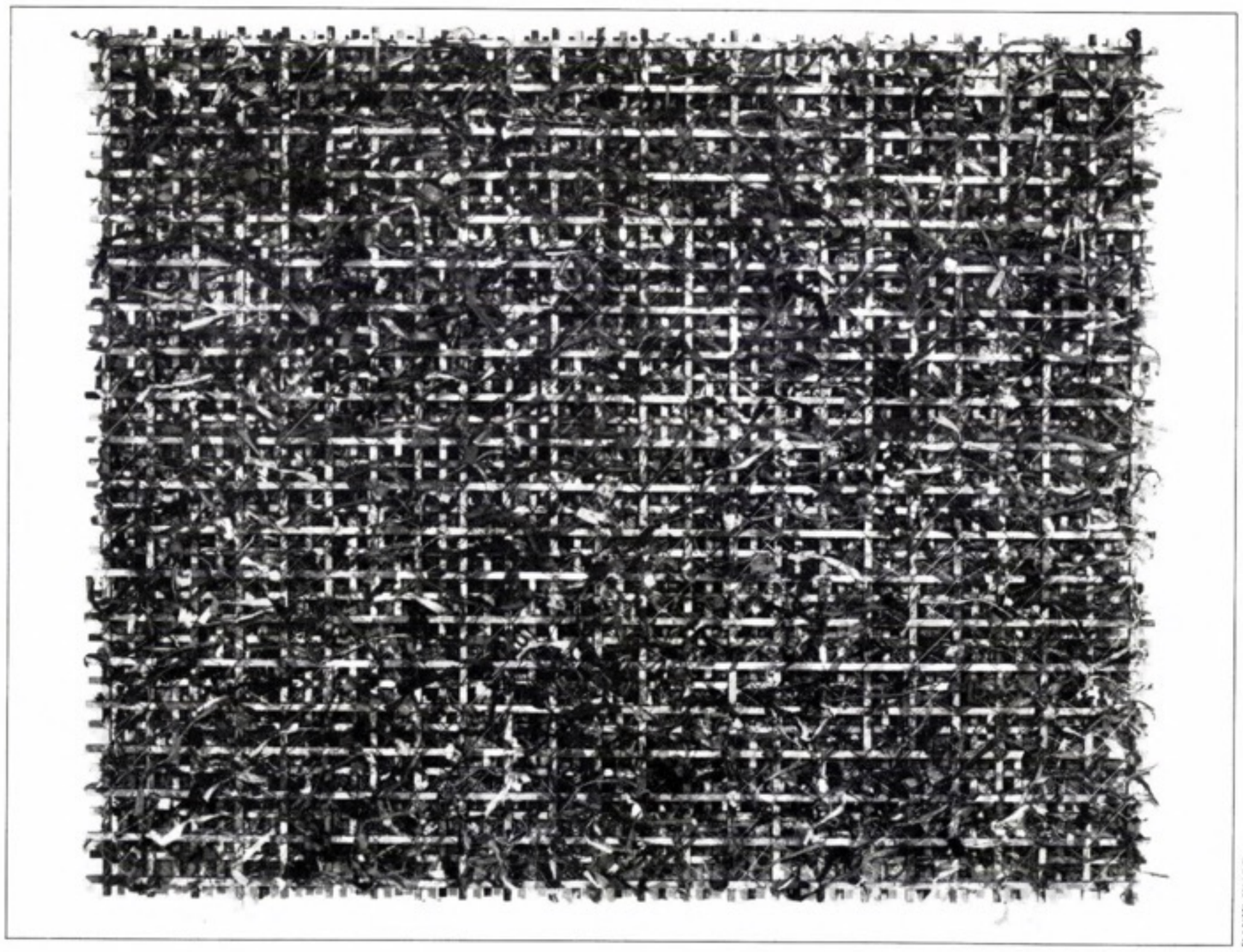
In 1979, a second tapestry workshop was founded, at West Dean College in Sussex, where the weavers proved their worth as craftswomen by weaving painstaking blow-ups of Henry Moore drawings, exhibited at the V & A the next year. Elsewhere, exhibitions based on personal selections of textiles have been successful, for example Marianne Straub's *Textiles Today* for East Midlands Arts and Michael Brennand-Wood's *Fabric and Form*, at the Crafts Council Gallery in 1982 and then in Australia, both valuable assessments of their period and fascinating reflections of the selector. *Gaudy Ladies*, at the Royal College of Art in 1979/80, the works of four RCA graduates, was a brave attempt to show bright colours to the world; but the world looked politely, and moved on.

Art-school training plays an enormous part in quality and direction, of course. I have a theory that the work produced by the new artist craftspeople of the decade was affected by the fact that colleges, geared to training designers for industry, began to find no outlet there, but sniffed a craft revival in the wind and conscientiously pointed some students in that direction. The meticulous training in structure persisted however – it was automatic – but no fine-art content was included; such liaisons were not traditional within colleges. The result was often a very knowledgeable but uninspired textile graduate. The few budding artist-craftspeople around have often come via a fine-art course, picking up craft skills later to suit concepts. Both can be valid directions, depending on the results required. Either way of training must be better than that of a weaver of wallhangings recently graduated from a reputable Canadian college, who was bewil-

dered by my mention of direction of twist of yarns and their effect.

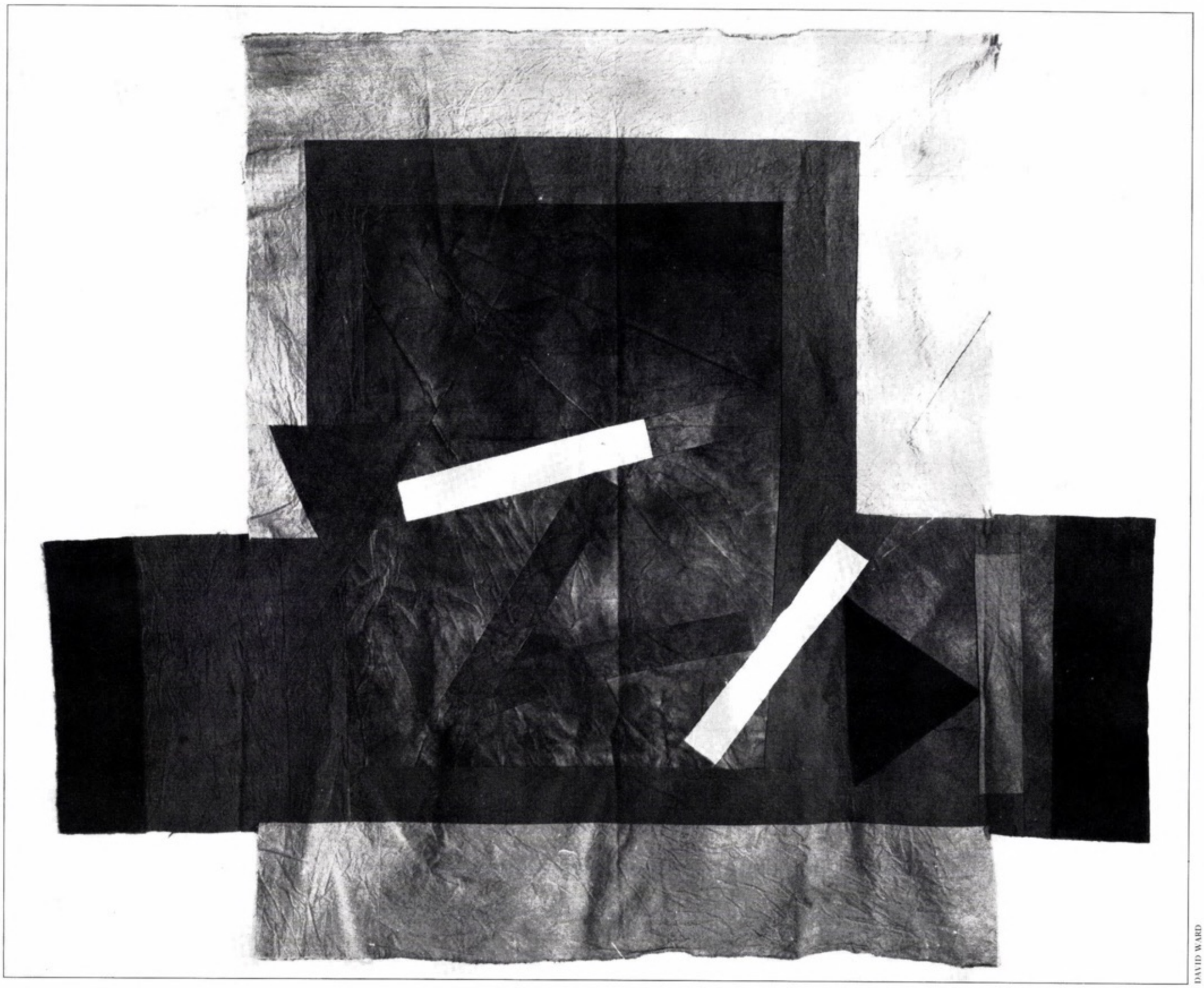
Art-school textiles in the last ten years have included figurative works, built environments, performance and time-based works, an interest in the "fragment" and in recycling fabrics with an implied "history," minimalist statements and sumptuous decorative works.

I see the only salvation of what remains of Britain's fine-art textile reputation to come via Goldsmiths' College's Embroidery degree course. It is the only one where the fine-art approach is not tucked into a design course – Goldsmiths' is uncompromising, and is producing artists. It remains to be seen whether these graduates will have the strength and support (currently both craft shops *and* art galleries are wary) to be able to continue in the real world.



DAVID WARD

Right: Trailing Colours, *120 cm high, 1981, painted wood mesh, threaded with silks, cotton fabrics and wire, by Michael Brennand-Wood. Below:* Rag Merchant, *173 cm, 1977, dyed, sewn cotton duck, by Stephenie Bergman*



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